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Saudi Arabia: The Pivotal Kingdom

SAUDI ARABIA

The Ceaseless Quest for Security

By Nadav Safran

Harvard University Press: 524 pp., \$25

By James Craig

THIS IS a very good book. It is tidy, calm, studied, erudite and scholarly. It handles a mass of material with skill and clarity. Introduced by a summary of the kingdom's history up to the death of Ibn Saud, it is thereafter in essence a year-by-year, almost a day-by-day account of Saudi foreign and defense policy in every field: the Gulf, the Yemenis, Arab-Israeli, the American connection. It is, therefore, dense and detailed. Nadav Safran, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard, relieves the detail by an admirable practice: he explains at the start of each section what he is going to say; he says it; then he summarizes what he has said. This makes for lucidity, though it does not increase the excitement. Nor does the prose style, which, though chaste and relatively free from the jargon of modern academe, is short on sparkle and elegance.

Professor Safran is particularly good on the central dilemma of Saudi foreign policy: how to reconcile the need for American support, political, military and technological, externally and perhaps also internally, with the fear of being branded as the stooge of Israel's chief ally. Here lies the principal cause of Saudi Arabia's alleged vacillation: a desire for two things which are in most circumstances incompatible. The reason why the Saudis always support Arab unity is not ideological conviction but their belief that when unity, or something approaching it, prevails, the moderates, i.e., the pro-Westerners, predominate, whereas when there is a split, the extremists drift off towards the Soviet Union and the critics of the Saudi-American connection are free to indulge their indignation, outside and inside the kingdom. For Saudi Arabia the United States is both an asset and a liability, a fact which those in Washington who say that Saudi Arabia is safe, that she has nowhere else to go, reject at their peril.

There are other reasons for Saudi hesitancy. Professor Safran accurately describes King Faisal's style: "a disposition to appease rather than resist"; "a tendency to wait for events to unfold... rather than seek to anticipate them"; "a propensity to give priority to immediate, clear demands rather than to long-term strategic considerations." Exactly:

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ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia with President Reagan in February, 1985

but as the book recognizes later, this was not only Faisal's style. It reflects national characteristics. Professor Safran argues that Saudi Arabia's position has declined since Faisal and that the reason is the quality of the (collective) leadership that followed his death. I accept neither the fact nor the reason.

The Saudis in any case cannot afford to be bold and incisive. In its endemic state of discord the Arab world has constant need of a mediator and for a number of reasons only Saudi Arabia can fill the part. She strives always, as Profes-